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## The Discourse of Fear around Health and Economy in Pakistani English Newspaper Articles on Covid-19

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### ABSTRACT

The present study aims to unravel the language of fear aroused in the English Newspapers about health and economy during Covid-19. The qualitative data was drawn from the daily Dawn, and 'The News'. Eight articles, four from each newspaper, were analyzed through qualitative lens. Findings reveal that the language of fear related to the country's healthcare system and economy is deployed mostly. The study demonstrates that certain phrases were used repeatedly to report about the worst economic recession and overwhelming situation in hospitals. A discourse of fear was created by sensationalizing certain situations and exploiting the language of Covid-19. The recommends reporting more about solutions to the problem than to create a hype that may damage the mental health of readers.

**Keywords:** Discourse of fear, language use, Covid-19, economic recession, healthcare system

### Introduction

The present study aims to understand the social context and social interaction around COVID-19 through newspaper articles in two prominent Pakistani English dailies on the subject. The discourse of fear spreading through newspapers is analyzed here by looking at how the writers discuss health and economy concerns. The paper addresses the following research questions:

- How do the Pakistani English newspaper articles portray a discourse of fear around the Covid-19 situation?
  - How do the articles present concerns on health and economy during Covid-19 lexically?
  - How do the articles present concerns on health and economy during Covid-19 ideologically?

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The most common medium of contact for ordinary people with the outside world was through news, both paper and electronic, during lockdown. Rafi (2020) states that discourse of fear is built as the repercussions of the language used to describe the severe effect of Covid-19 on increasing death, pressure on the health care system, and economic slump. The language and ideology presented in the news affect people's mental well-being directly. To understand newspapers' role and how news, presenting facts through the choice of words and presentation, allow a discourse to spread, making this study significant. Analyzing the language of newspaper articles on the pandemic published in Dawn and The News is significant as it examines linguistics features of the text, followed by the interpretation through its connection with events and finally through the lens of its social connections that shapes the text. Together, these will help academia learn about the role of newspaper articles during Covid-19 in spreading a discourse of fear while talking about health and economic conditions.

## **Methodology**

Keeping in view the nature of research, we have adopted qualitative methodology here. Qualitative methodology focuses on exploring and interpreting the meaning of phenomenon and their social implications and offers multiple approaches to debunk and construct meaning. To understand the discourse of fear spreading through the newspaper articles written in Covid-19, we studied eight articles published in the two most important English newspapers published in Pakistan daily. 'Dawn' and 'The News' newspapers are used as sources of data. The news with 120,000 copies, and The Dawn with 109,000 copies printed daily are the most read English newspaper in Pakistan (All-Pakistan Newspaper Society, APNS). We have chosen four articles/editorials per newspaper, published during the last four months, discussing health and economy affected by Covid-19.

## **Lexical Analysis**

In this section we have analyzed the language used in the text. The lexicons used by media is fear-mongering and danger anticipating (for similar finding see Chaiuk & Dunaievska, 2020). This is an international dilemma, and words like world, country(ies), people, government and global are most used. However, we have divided our lexical analysis section into two main themes dealing with health and economy.

### **Health**

Covid-19 is a pandemic and mainly a health-related issue. Manderson and Levine (2020) discuss how Covid-19 has spread fear of risk and fall out among ordinary people. In the data, the words COVID and pandemic are used in 42 and 38 times, respectively. The excessive use of these words would continuously remind the readers of the distressing situation they are in. Apart from them, three other high-frequency words from the articles under analysis here lead to how language is used to propagate fear; Health (or healthcare) used 24 times in selected articles, virus 23 times, and death(s) 21 times.

The adjective of quality used each time with health or healthcare is negative. These negative qualities describe the status of our healthcare system and increase the fear of losing human being, for example, deplorable health infrastructure, deteriorating health situation, and healthcare systems stretched to breaking point. Although the readers generally know about the country's healthcare system, however, in a health crisis, such words play an essential role in arousing fear. In one article, the writer says,

Excerpt 1: *Here, the government appears to be treating the **virus outbreak as over—or as fait accompli**. Either of these responses would be a **grave mistake**.* (Sherani, May 22, 2020)

The sentence starts with the writer directly disapproving of the government's treatment of the virus. For the treatment of the virus outbreak, it is vital to notice 'over' and 'fait accompli' two different words leading to the same conclusion, disaster because of being ignorant and having a health crisis, are being used. The writer notices that government behaves as if either the virus is conquered over or it has conquered. The government cannot realize that the problem has just started, and measures need to be taken to curb it. He confirms this to be 'a grave mistake' as things are serious and necessary for the writer, but he does not see the same attitude from the government. As Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary (2010) defines grave (adj.) as a '(of situation, and feeling) very serious and important, giving you a reason to feel worried.' The government appears with two different responses, and interestingly none of them is a response on controlling the virus as the word 'either' is used to call both responses as no response or response not needed or a response worth a mistake. This can be compared with Spadaro (2020), who shows concerns about governments' interference with human rights while taking measures to prevent coronavirus from spreading.

The word death(s) is used 21 times in eight articles, which seems fearsome. It is used in phrases like, death by virus or death by starvation, deaths in Pakistan have doubled in 18 days, spiraling death counts. Repeatedly talking about death, the readers are reminded of the danger and devastating situation. It shows the concerns of the writers expressing the lack of options the readers are left with.

Excerpt 2: *However, strict measures directed as lockdowns, quarantine, and social distancing were too late as the **number of deaths** mounted to a **hundred and then thousands every day**. **Europe and America** ended up suffering a much wider spread of **the virus and number of deaths**.* (Khalid, April 20, 2020)

Excerpt 3: ***The number of deaths** in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and other South Asian is not very high till the end of March 2020, but a fast rise in the number of patients is **alarming**.* (Mir, March 31, 2020)

The bold phrases in excerpt 2 and 3 from two different articles from The News compare countries that have experienced the strike of the virus and those that have yet to experience. The phrase 'number of deaths' in both articles shows the seriousness of the situation throughout. When the developed world, Europe and America, is unable to tackle the virus because of a lack

of timely measures, developing countries would face alarming situations. The significance of the word 'everyday' is undeniable because the numbers of affected are mounting. The word 'alarming' is used not just in the context of the virus but also in developing countries with a shortage of proper health facilities and fragile economies. In an earlier article, Chattha (April 09, 2020) compares the human cost with economical cost by using comparative degree 'more' and concludes that human cost will be higher than the economic cost. The following section discusses how the lexically discourse of fear is portrayed concerning the economy during Covid-19.

### ***Economy***

From selected articles, the high-frequency words from articles leading to the way language is used to propagate fear from the perspective of economy are; economic, economy, and economies are used 78 times altogether, in phrases such as; fragile economy, economic recession, alarming economic outlook, negative economic growth rate, economic damages and the list goes on. When people are already concerned about their health safety, the use of such words is horrifying because they foretell the loss of existing jobs and scarcity in more jobs. It is important to note that the economic crunch is limited to developing countries, but U.S., U.K., and Sweden are also on the radar, and to be precise, there can be 'global economic recession' as one writer puts it. The word recession has great significance in macroeconomics as it is used to refer to a significant decline in the general economy, which causes a sharp rise in unemployment. Kafiriri and Ross (2020) note that regardless of economic status, it needs to be understood that an epidemic attacks all, yet the marginalized bore the brunt the most.

On the other hand, poverty and poor are used 18 and 17 times, respectively. Besides, the word crisis is used 13 times, and surprisingly enough, in a health emergency, the word crisis is not used for health but the economy most of the time. The articles talk more about the economy than about health, withdrawing the readers' attention from the real problem, the pandemic. In one article writer says,

Excerpt 4: *As lockdowns at home and abroad continue, Pakistan's **economic fallout** is unprecedented, with the **poorest and most vulnerable bearing the burden disproportionately.*** (Hussain, April 18, 2020)

Excerpt 5: *The **lockdown** in many countries will cause **massive unemployment and poverty.*** (Mir, March 31, 2020)

The writers assume that most people are already living in poverty, and the crisis will have a dark impact on society. As the highlighted words in excerpt 4 and 5 suggest that due to the pandemic world, it will face an economic crisis resulting in the rise of poverty. Comparing the two excerpts, it is clear that even though people are already living in poverty, the worst is yet to come due to the pandemic. After knowing that the virus spreads due to interconnectedness is thinking of closing trade and tourism for a long time, some countries have already called for a lockdown. A situation like this is worrisome for developing countries because they have fewer resources to

manufacture goods, and many of their workers are employed in developed countries. If more people from developing countries get unemployed, it will create unemployment issues, and the foreign exchange sent from abroad by these workers would stop. The writer uses the adjective 'massive' to approach unemployment and use a conjunction 'and' to add poverty to it, as the two go together for the writer. The writers repeatedly mention poverty and unemployment and fear that if developed countries do not join hands with developing countries, the crisis will be beyond control. The writers generally do not look in favor of a lockdown, suspecting economic disaster to be a bigger problem than health disaster (see Pualido, 2020 for social media role in spreading the news during Covid-19). Writers seem to worry too much about the economic mess at hand when there is already a prevailing health crisis (see excerpt 6).

Excerpt 6: *Pakistan, a **developing country with less resources**, has also been hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic. Its economy has been sent into a **tailspin**.* (Isran, May 19, 2020)

The uses of the country's name, Pakistan, to emphasize its situation as a developing country with fewer resources plays with the readers' emotions who would go mostly by the citizens of the country. Thus, realizing them of their vulnerability. In another article, the writer uses the word whopping before the package amount \$2 trillion to mention that it is not a small amount, and it is 10 percent of the US GDP (Chattha, April 09, 2020) they are offering as a fiscal package. The phrase their GDP signifies the difference between developed and developing countries. The fiscal package U.S. announced is 10 percent of its GDP; however, it sums up more than 100% of a developing country's GDP. Comparing developed and developing countries create more fear of the economic crisis among the readers from developing countries. The writers use phrases like a developing country with fewer resources, fewer pandemic response measures, and uneven distribution of resources that create hopelessness due to fear of dearth of support from their governments in trying times.

An ideological analysis is conducted on health and economy-related concerns raised by the writers of newspaper articles from Dawn and The News in the next section.

### ***Ideological analysis***

Language, according to Fairclough (1995), helps create change. He assumes that a behavior change can be created through language. By analyzing the newspaper articles ideologically, we confirm that language is a tool of power. We observe in this section, the reproduction of power differentials and restructuring of ideologies. The section is divided into health and economy to understand the two major concerns arising from Covid-19.

### ***Health***

Health is a significant concern around the world in the Covid-19 situation. Earlier it was in the news, but now COVID has spread around us; it has reached our doorsteps. Hussain (May 30, 2020) issues a warning,



Excerpt 7: *First, COVID was in the headlines. Now it is on our timelines. First, COVID had a name. Now it has a face.* (Hussain, May 30, 2020)

Through the newspaper articles, the writers do not cease to reproduce the discourse that Pakistan being less developed, must accept its disadvantageous position and must not expect too much because, in the current scenario, even the most developed are suffering. This discourse promotes fear and self-pity among readers (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

Covid-19 is turning into the greatest tragedy in human history, and writing this into newspapers to be read by ordinary people is spreading a discourse of fear. Mir (March 31, 2020) shows two critical facts about health. First, it gives reference to research, which suggesting the distressing number of deaths. Covid-19 can cause in one year, making it the most astonishing mortality rate in a year in history. Secondly, the neighboring countries of China are deficient in proper healthcare facilities to detect the patient. This would alarm Pakistani readers; they are among the unmentioned neighbors in the research. Both these facts are interlinked, promoting a more prominent discourse of helplessness. Simultaneously, the virus is uncontrollable, with thousands of recorded deaths and millions expected. Writing about the absence of testing facilities on March 31, 2020, when it has been more than 35 days since the virus landed in the country and more than 90 days since the first case appear, shows the sheer lack of seriousness by a country of 220 million, under threat of a contagious disease. This discourse is promoting an ideology of powerlessness to less developed countries and affirming power differentials. Power differential here seems self-evident and, as if, unavoidable. The discourse convinces the reader of the power differential's naturalness, confirming the non-existence of choice, not for individuals or the state. However, in the same article, the writer propagates more fear of death by comparing it with leaves falling in autumn, quoting a health department official. It is significant how the writer brought forth the words of someone who can be relied upon in case of a health emergency. This is not only for convincing the readers but also for removing the responsibility from oneself. The writer has also made his article a part of the more significant discourse by quoting a person of authority. The message, though, comes from a top official of Punjab's health department for the people of Punjab, but it equally covers other provinces too, as no province of Pakistan is in an ideal situation to tackle the outbreak of the virus, and the situation throughout Pakistan is frightening. The writer, keeping in view the government's political battle and incompetence, criticizes them for not waking up and doing their job correctly, suggesting that people fight the virus independently. This has two implications, spreading the discourse of fear and taking away the responsibility of the government.

Excerpt 8: *Unfortunately, the record of Pakistan about investment in human development is very dismal. We hardly spend 2 percent of our GDP on education and 0.52 percent on health, though health has now been transferred to provinces under the 18th Amendment.* (Isran, May 19, 2020)

Pakistan has a population of over 220 million and ranks fifth-most populous country in the world. When we look at the country's healthcare system, we feel very disappointed that our healthcare system is fragile even after more than 70 years of independence. In the current

COVID situation, we have a negligible number of beds in ICUs around the country and no more than 2,200 ventilators for a population of 220 million. The writer uses strong words like, unfortunately, and dismal when talking about investment in human development. The use of the word 'unfortunately' in the beginning is meaningful. He shows concern about investment in the education and health sector. There seems an ideological shift in the mentioned lines (excerpt 8), the writer is not talking about the present dilemma, and he is generally talking about the country's GDP. He mentions how health and education have always remained low priority (see Akram et al. 2020 for understanding post-Covid-19 situation in Pakistani universities).

### ***Economy***

This section is based on the ideological analysis in the economy's perspective in selected articles from Pakistani English Newspapers. This analysis attempts to link the discourse in news articles with the social situation during the breakout of Covid-19, to decipher the ideology of the texts.

Excerpt 9: *With countries going into lockdown and non-essential businesses shut down, it is no surprise that we are already experiencing an economic slump. The consequences of this economic downturn are straightforward: an increase in unemployment and poverty, a decrease in average income and productivity.* (Chattha, April 09, 2020)

Chattha (2020) clarifies our current economic position as being in a 'slump'. This economic depression would only be worsened with the enforcement of a lockdown. Therefore, the writer here is following the ideology which supports keeping the country open and avoiding lockdown. Pakistan is a developing country that is already facing a population explosion and unemployment. Being a fragile economy, the writer affirms that lockdown will only increase the crisis. Bad governance or natural disasters, the country is not in stable economic conditions. Current events can cause a great economic recession, the writer warns without using the term, yet mentioning increased unemployment and poverty. To lockdown, a country whose economy is already slumped is not a choice for the writer. He significantly opposes the lockdown and puts his statement on record through this article. The writers are nearly concerned about the country's economy, as is seen in Hussain's article (see excerpt 10).

Excerpt 10: *With its economy already struggling, Pakistan is likely to be hardest hit as it struggles to save lives and livelihoods simultaneously. Along with Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, Pakistan is in danger of experiencing a negative economic growth rate.* (Hussain, April 15, 2020)

There are many ideologies portrayed through these articles. However, the financial crisis is vastly commented upon in the articles. There is a convenient ideology shift between concerns on health or economy. Moreover, it can easily be observed that the primary concern of our writers is an economic setback. The facts and seriousness of the situation are often being neglected here. Pakistan is unable to make a clear stance on what does it want? Lives or livelihoods? Each has a cost, and we are supposed to choose wisely what costs us the least. Under the current scenario,



both cannot be saved. Neither the economy is strong nor the healthcare system. The writer issues a warning of a negative economic growth rate, which will negatively affect the healthcare system. The writers here are trying to launch a discourse against lockdown and curfew, promoting a fear not caused by the deadly virus but by the lockdown due to people losing money daily. The writer presents a quandary state in which government does not know what to do. Sibony (2020) also talks about the diversity of world governments' responses, mainly focusing on the U.K. government's stand during the early coronavirus outbreak.

In the same vein, Khalid (April 20, 2020) puts our attention to the fact that developing countries suffering and even the oil-producing Gulf region are suffering due to the pandemic. This is putting forth a discourse of global dilemma. After knowing the fact that the virus has spread due to contact, the world has decided to remain disconnected. Many countries are considering manufacturing their goods and avoiding imports in the future due to the current uncertainty. The whole situation is quite distressful for a country like Pakistan. Thousands of Pakistani expatriates support their families and the country by sending foreign exchange homes. Their return home with the loss of jobs will create more unemployment and loss of foreign exchange. The planes filled with immigrant workers from Arab countries is a sad narrative, presenting a gloomy scene. During all that picture, Pakistan will suffer because poverty and unemployment will dramatically increase in the country.

## Conclusion

In this study, we have analyzed how text in different newspaper articles during the outbreak of coronavirus is full of fear-inducing vocabulary. The writers skilfully use language and give references to facts and figures bring forth a dramatic portrayal of the situation, enhancing public anxiety and insecurity only. By developing the fear of economic recession and healthcare system failure, the media kept accusing the government and its general global economic status. The pro-lockdown and anti-lockdown follow different perspective on the Covid-19 issue. The writers who consider health a significant concern at this moment support lockdown to save the virus from spreading.

Furthermore, the ones thinking the economy must be saved do not support lockdown as they argue that economic downfall will result in immediate and lasting problems for the country. Supporting a lockdown or not, considering health or economy to be a significant concern, the writers in any case express their fear through their writings on the country's current situation and its future due to Covid-19. This study, thus, shows how vital the role of print media is in constructing the discourse of fear around the Covid-19 situation by using language as a tool.

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